

Auld Lang Syne and the planetary party that marks the arrival of the future. None of this has much to do with the main plot, which could happily (and, to be honest, more plausibly) have been located in, say, *Blade Runner's* 2026. But the themes gain enormously in immediacy from the proximity of this nearest of near-future settings – so much so that Bassett's '97 Mercedes, for example, is a cannily-borrowed prototype of a real '97 Mercedes – and the subtlety with which its world is extended from our own. Much of the shockwave-rider aesthetic of *fin-de-siècle* information culture, and the sf that feeds off it, lies in the nearness of the near futures it explores, the sense of the speed at which change happens and the vastness of the changes awaiting our world between here and (say) 31/12/99. And while it's arguable that the millennial setting is at base a rhetorical ploy to lay claim to greater topicality and significance than the film will really bear, the evocation of the last day of the world is so finely,

persuasively done that it disarms all reservations about its actual point.

*Strange Days* is an unusually strongly-written movie for its genre, a fact reflected in its untraditional ordering of the credits. The *Brazil*-like script history had Cameron lay out the basic plot, which was then passed to *Age of Innocence's* Jay Cocks for the main dialogue draft, and back to Cameron for rewrites. It's hard to judge how much of the layered, intricate quality of concept and plot is due to this unusual synergy of genre technician and literary craftsman. Cocks has disavowed any great interest in sf, while ideas have never been Cameron's strongest suit; but somewhere in the space between them something has gone remarkably right. One of the many kinds of intensely genre-specific pleasure you can only get from sf is the art of minimalist bluff: the awe-striking shamelessness with which ludicrous premises are explained away with a single offhand line. And while Cameron himself has always been a

genius at shooting around the intellectual holes in his derivative and often downright silly premises, *Strange Days* is surely his finest hour.

This, after all, is a script that sets out to build a serious, gritty, and futurewards-looking film on the unpromising speculation that within less than four years any twerp with a bad jacket will have access to daft-looking beanies that record our brains on minidisc. How can that have come about? "It was originally developed by the FBI for interrogation of suspects, but it went underground." And that's all we ever hear – not a dicky-bird about, say, the underlying science (unless you count "Superconducting Quantum Interference Device," which might just as well be "Subnullitronic Quasimodular Iobba-ray Doodah"). Brilliant. And it works for motivation holes, too: at the very moment I jotted "WHAT does Bassett see in this loser?" came a beautifully-crafted flashback lasting, I suppose, perhaps half a minute with only one significant line of dialogue, that answers the question neatly, precisely, and above all so fast that you never have time to think *Hang on a moment...*

Bigelow's own contribution is, however, considerable. For such an iconic figure, she's never filed terribly easily, but three convenient projections have tended to recur: Bigelow the long leggy girlie who writes and shoots like a guy, role model and fetish figure for all distaff film-makers who dream of making the boys' team; Bigelow the baffling genre-bender whose odd mixes of vampire and western, cop potboiler and femme drama, heist and surf movies share little obvious auteurial stamp beyond a disdain for the mainstream, an enthusiasm for high concept, and a refusal to take the easy path of wink-wink irony; and Bigelow the painter turned pulp merchant whose earnest, muscular treatments of exploitation storylines dangle themselves teasingly between art film and video filler. A serious, professionally ambitious woman writer-director whose gender is sometimes (especially in *Point Break*, which made more money than *Strange Days*) stamped on her work largely by the absence of visible signs of its presence, she's attracted comment in her past mainly for her technical skill with showy, virile action set pieces.

Well, this is certainly a specialism that *Strange Days* – a film, after all, peculiarly self-conscious about film – seems almost custom-made to promote. The playback sequences, in particular, proclaim a positively hybriatic virtuosity, given that their defining characteristic is to give a complete, no-edits, synaesthetic record of actual life (and death) experience, in explicit contrast to the feeble approximation

began to scout for a place where Dahlia could disgorge.

Just as there are, in any city, karaokes that boast a catalogue of the damned – those illicit ghosts that constitute the fibresphere's dispossessed – so too, in McMurdo City, this frigid oasis at the bottom of the world, there were establishments where the patron, if less illicitly, then just as damnably, perhaps, might adulate, consort with, or simply wham-bam-and-thank-you-ma'am a favourite spectre, a refugee from Earth2.

I braked; the Bentley slewed, came to a halt. The sign (its neon just blinking out, the city suffused in an amber glow) read *Les Enfants Terribles*.

Touching Dahlia's face, my fingers disappeared into a luminous epidermis, her body waxing insubstantial, holographic. I felt dizzy. My heart began to palpitate as it did when I awoke with a panic, a night fright, thinking I was about to die, alone and friendless, still incarcerated in the chill environs of Boys' Town. I put a hand over my chest, trying to moderate my heart's overwrought gymnastics by an act of will.

I got out, passed between the karaoke's Doric columns; a boy tugged at my sleeve. "Don't you see the sign?" he said. Several other little pimps congregated about me until they blocked my way. "This is the kingdom of childhood," the boy continued, "the kingdom of love and of death. The ladies are resting. Try later. Try tonight." He was Algerian; Egyptian, maybe, like most of the boys in this slice of the continent; a demobbed soldier, a veteran of the North-South wars. I cast a backwards glance. Inside the car, Dahlia – trying vainly to cover herself as she deliquesced into a parallel world of intelligent light – was little more than a scintillant flock of submicroscopic machines, her clothes, even her flesh, already reassembled by The Wound. I looked up and down the street, contemplating violence. No cirrocumulus that morning, only a merciless, hallucinatory sun that saturated the gulls and skuas milling about the garbage dumps, the shacks and deserted dives clinging to the roots of the organi-tech clad towers: jagged, inverted icicles cloistering those who – grown fat on unregulated oil and mineral exploitation, yet not fat enough to return home – continued to live on a diet of rapine, comforted by their other selves, the runaways of a world encoded within reality's mirrors. I had to gain admittance; about me all was dereliction; *Les Enfants* was probably the only operative karaoke in the Sound.

"I have an eidolon in the car," I said, "a princess of death, a girl called Dahlia Chan." Some of the beefier lads folded their arms across their chests, signalling their determination to keep me from entering. "You must have heard of her: she was big in Vientiane and Bangkok." But that had been many years ago; none of these boys was old enough to appreciate the High Camp of a cult property. "Me and Dahlia – we're looking for work." Peering over their heads I inspected a musty interior. Oblique rays of mote-filled light fell from high, stained-glass windows; the furniture was covered in sheets; I pushed my way through the

infant cordon – nylon doors swung open, closed; a second set of doors followed suit – passed a chain gang of surfers, datacapped, giggling-out on their vacs, little talent scouts seeking newly-emergent morphologies, these children resembling spacemen, the victims of a mad hairdresser's experiments, over-zealous electric chair quality-control engineers. I plucked an oily morsel from a half-demolished buffet of baby penguin and krill; breakfasted as I swung through 360 degrees, surveying. Framed, antique photographs of Sailor Moon and Dorothy Gale hung behind the ornate bar; there were photographs of derricks and mines too, roustabouts posing in the foreground. A banner read: *If you can't afford to tip, go back to the land of censorship*. Satisfied that *Les Enfants* provided suitable refuge, I retraced my steps; confronted the boys; exhaled a homicidal miasma into their contumacious faces. "I'm like you." I pulled off a glove, held up my thumb and revealed to them the mark of the paternoster. "I know what it is to live in fear." The pubescent hustlers fixed me with lowered, frosted brows; convened a parliamentary scrum.

My teeth and extremities throbbing with a brutal ache, my nerves overtaxed, ready to blow, I traipsed back to the Bentley, adjusting my jumpsuit's thermostat as its coils struggled to protect me from the – 30°C cold. Before I could open the door, Dahlia, now wholly spectral, slipped impatiently through metal and glass; as she walked ahead, desperate to set herself behind the sanctuary of those kitsch, fake marble walls, I could almost hear The Wound calling to her, that locus in space-time where information became live, where the fibresphere bled into our own world; the site of sites that was everywhere and nowhere and which – her simulacrum disintegrating – was consuming her, deporting her piecemeal back to the collective images from which she had sprung.

"I know him," Dahlia muttered to the pimps, "really, it's all right. He's my driver. He's done time for me." One of the boys – the boy I had spoken with, their leader, it seemed – made a unilateral decision, broke off from the pack and led us through the karaoke's shrouded interior, through its VIP lounge – so like a raped jewellery box, all cracked mirrors, torn brocades, ruined filigree and silks, its treasure scattered, ruined – and up a flight of stairs. Skipping into a darkened room he gestured for us to follow; a dormitory of spooks – a dozen or more Translators glowing softly with interned fugitives from Earth2, children of the fibresphere who, like my own child, had outshone, sometimes outlived, their originals – stretched before us. The boy opened the lid of an empty coffin and Dahlia – a post-infinite number of tiny, dancing lights, a bright cloud of Heraclitian flux – lay down, closed her eyes. Within moments – the coffin's modem flickering – her dissolution stabilized; the warp between worlds, the limbo that would, come nightfall, allow her to re-access Earth Prime, cradled her. I leaned against a wall; slid down to the rubber floor. The boy sat opposite, his back against a Translator, the image of a tomb-robber's assistant.

"We go from karaoke to karaoke," I said, "worked most of the Antarctic Peninsula. Last place we hit

Juliette Lewis in *Strange Days* ...in which cinema takes a hard look at the appetites that sustain it and doesn't entirely relish what it finds...

